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AUTHOR Blake, Robert W.
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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that people can be trained to use language to respond to varieties of literature with more discrimination and with more confidence than in the past. This is true first, because there are now studies which detail categories of response to literature; and second, because clinical psychiatrists and psychological counselors have developed uses of language which can be directly applied to the process of responding to literature. Two versions of a classroom discussion about "A Spring Night" are given in the form of a script. The most significant techniques developed by psychologists which can be used directly in responding to literature are described. Also examined are four types of responses to poetry (sense, feeling, tone, and intention) and five general categories of response to literature (meaning, feeling, structure, theme, and value). (TS)

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# Some Uses of Language in Responding to Literature

Robert W. Blake

How to use language to respond to literature? And how to train others to respond to literature? These are simple questions, but reading and responding to literature make up such a complex task that we have been at a loss at how to describe with confidence a straightforward approach.

There's much contradictory advice on how one should respond to literature, and as a result, I sense, a great deal of confusion among English teachers about the topic. On the one hand, an experienced, highly respected high school English teacher refuses to have her students read a common novel. She individualizes her literature program, stocking the classroom with paperback books, having the students read the books they choose, and discussing with them individually their reading. Another high school English teacher, equally experienced and respected, does use novels for common reading, precisely to teach them the skills of literary analysis, such as recognizing main and minor characters, identifying main and minor story lines, understanding the personality of characters, understanding of devices such as satire, irony, and fantasy, and so forth. But he refuses to have his students attend to questions dealing with their attitudes and values. He says that it is not the responsibility of the literature teacher to inculcate morals in his students. Neither one, it seems to me, is doing the complete job.

When I continue to discuss responding to literature, furthermore, with these teachers, and others who reflect one or the other's point of view, I detect an attitude that is hard to admire. They both care for young

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people, they enjoy the life of literature themselves, but, on the whole, they don't report a lot of success in training students to use language to respond to literature. Basically, it seems to be an essential mistrust in the young people's ability to read and talk about what they have read. As they explain how they teach literature, the teachers say things like these. "Some of my students need so much help." "What you are able to get from the kids depends upon their 'literary sophistication.'" "My experience with the more able kids has shown me that they can read literature but that most of the other students can't." "I wouldn't like my abler students to stick around while my less able students need review." "The poor ones just couldn't get the theme of a novel." And "The majority of students are incapable of reading literature in a technical fashion."

I believe that we are now in a position to do better than we realize. We can train people to use language to respond to varieties of literature with more discrimination and with increasing confidence. First, we have impressive studies which spell out in considerable detail categories of response to literature. And secondly, clinical psychiatrists and psychological counselors have developed uses of language which can be directly applied to the process of responding to literature.

And since these techniques involve conscious uses of language, anyone--be it a high school English teacher or student, elementary language arts teacher or youngster--can learn how to respond in a gratifying manner to all manner of literature, including novels, short stories, plays, non-fiction, TV programs, or films.

Let me show you what I mean. What follow immediately are a poem that has been used successfully with secondary school English students and two hypothetical situations in which teachers are training youngsters in how to use language in responding to literature.

A SPRING NIGHT

His son meant something that he couldn't name
He had his picture in his wallet,
but never remembered taking out the wallet
for anything but cash, or an address, or a name.

He could have hated him, but didn't
even though the boy reminded him
how stuck he was because of him.
He could have loved him, too, but didn't.

When Mr. Cuff came home at night
there was reading, or sitting on the stoop till dark,
watching the dead-end street he lived on fade to dark,
so they didn't talk together much at night.

Sitting as usual this April evening
watching an impassively dying sun,
he became aware that hesitantly his son
was coming to him out of the evening.

They sat awhile together then quietly
the boy asked him, "Do you really like boys?
I'd just like to know that, if you really like boys."
Mr. Cuff was stunned. The sun set quietly.

Communication was a rusted hinge to Cuff.
He sought some way convincingly to say
"There's just the word I've wanted long to say
but couldn't say." "Like is the word," thought Cuff.

"I'm damned," said Mr. Cuff under his breath.
Finally the boy shuffled off. Cuff went to bed.
"What's that you're mumbling over there in bed?"
Asked Mrs. Cuff in the dark. Cuff lay still as death.

Richard Beloof

Classroom Discussion about "A Spring Night": A Sample Script

First Version

Teacher: Now that you've had a chance to read the poem by yourself, let's discuss it. First, what's the rhyme scheme of the poem?

Student 1: It's a, b, b, a.

Student 2: It's a blah poem. Nothing much happens in it. It's dull.

Teacher: Now, that's not the kind of response we should make in an English classroom. When you say something like that, it doesn't help us understand the poem very well.
Let's go on. Why is there an exception to the rhyme scheme in the last stanza?

Student 3: To show a contrast.

Teacher: How does it show a contrast.

Student 3: I don't know.

Teacher: Does anyone else know?

Student 4: It shows that Cuff is dead.

Teacher: No. Cuff isn't dead. Any other ideas?

Student 5: I don't think Cuff died either. It's kind of symbolic. Maybe something inside him died. But he's going to change a little. He's bothered because his son wants to know does he really "like" boys. And he's going to be better to his son.

Student 6: Aw, you're crazy. Cuff will never change. The word "death" means that Cuff's feelings for his son have died. He won't change.

Teacher: Yes. Yes. But we're getting ahead of ourselves. Let's return to that question when we discuss the theme of the poem.
Does anyone find a use of figurative language in the poem?

Student 7: "Communication was a rusted hinge to Cuff"?

Teacher: Yes. What example of figurative language is it?

Student 8: A simile?

Teacher: No. Can anyone tell us why?

Student 8: A simile is a comparison between two unlike things using "like" or "as."

Teacher: Then what is this example?

Student 8: A metaphor.

Teacher: Why? What is a metaphor?

Student 9: A metaphor is an implied comparison between two unlike things.

Teacher: That's right. And in the metaphor Cuff's communication is compared to a rusted hinge.
Now, let's look at Cuff-- what sort of a person is he?

On the surface, the way in which this teacher handles student responses to literature seems adequate, but on closer examination, we discover that he or she doesn't encourage the students at all, and, in fact, inhibits them from making satisfying responses to literature. Let me point out some of the specific instances in which the teacher has restrained student responses.

1. Didn't read or have the poem read out loud so the students could hear the rhythm and drama of the poem.
2. When Student 2 says "It's a blah poem" doesn't recognize the reaction as a personal, emotional response and doesn't follow up on a discussion of it. Cuts off further responses by stating that there are only certain sorts of language appropriate for an English classroom.
3. When Student 1 says the rhyme scheme is a, b, b, a, the teacher doesn't continue with questions about the relationship of the structure to the main idea of the poem.
4. Doesn't help Student 3 verbalize his understanding of why there is an exception to the rhyme scheme in the last stanza.

5. Tells the students that "Cuff is dead" in an unequivocal manner and misses a chance to let the student discover for himself that he has made an incorrect response.
6. Stops Students 5 and 6 from discussing levels of meaning and possible themes in the poem when the topics have been raised by the students themselves. Refuses to alter preconvinced notion of how the responses should be guided.
7. Wants someone to pick out figures of speech. This by itself is not detrimental, but he does not ask why this particular figure is appropriate in this context. Will accept only a formal definition of metaphor. Doesn't encourage the students to verbalize their comprehension of how aptly the figure of speech relates to the kind of person Cuff is.

The teacher here is using language in negative ways and not training the students to learn how to respond to literature. In fact, he is doing just the opposite: turning them away from a positive feeling toward literature. What makes such an approach so damaging, however, is that some teachers believe that it is satisfactory. The teacher is "covering" the poem, of course, and is teaching skills of literary analysis, like rhyme scheme and figurative language. But how far removed are these uses of language from any sensible discussion of the poem!

Now here is another hypothetical situation in which the teacher, who has been trained both in literary analysis and in techniques of psychological counseling, uses the same poem as a basis for training the students to respond to literature.

Classroom Discussion about "A Spring Night": A Sample Script

SECOND VERSION

Teacher: Now that we have read the poem out loud, does anyone have any reactions or responses?

Student 1: Wow! It's a sad poem. I really felt sorry for the boy.

Teacher: Uh. Huh.

Student 1: Well, I mean imagine having a father like that. He doesn't even talk to you at all.

Teacher: And you wouldn't like that?

Student 1: I sure wouldn't. And in the poem it says that Cuff doesn't love or even hate the boy. He just doesn't feel anything about him.

Teacher: Are you saying that not feeling anything is worse than even hating?

Student 1: Right. When you hate, you're at least showing something. Some kind of feeling.

Teacher: Okay. Any other reactions?

Student 2: Yeah. I don't like the poem. It was blah, blah! So dull. Nothing much happened.

Teacher: Do you know why you feel that way?

Student 2: Well, the words are all so dull. And they're even the same words at the end of the lines. In other poems they rhyme. They're not the same.

Teacher: Uh. Huh. Why do you suppose the poet did that?

Student 2: I don't know.

Teacher: What does the poem seem to be about?

Student 2: It's about Cuff and his boy.

Teacher: And what's Cuff like?

Student 2: He doesn't like his boy. Doesn't love him or hate him.

Teacher: Anything else?

Student 2: He doesn't talk much. Cuff doesn't.

Teacher: Right. In what way do you suppose the words in the poem are like Cuff?

Student 2: He's dull, and the words in the poem are dull. I guess the words are like Cuff. Dull.

Teacher: Do you think the poet used these dull words to show us what Cuff was like?

Student 2: Sure. Sure. But I still don't like the poem.

Teacher: That's all right, you don't have to like it. We're all different. As Mark Twain once said, "that's what makes horse races."

So the poet used the dull words for a reason. The words of the poem, in other words, reflect the meaning of the poem.

Any other reactions?

Student 3: I was thinking about how the poet used the same words instead of words that rhyme. But why the change at the end with "breath" and "death?"

Teacher: What do you think is the reason?

Student 3: Well, it's a change. The words stand out. When a writer makes words stand out, there's usually a reason for it.

Teacher: And why does the poet do it here?

Student 3: Cuff's bothered by what his boy said. He's lying there at night thinking about it.

Teacher: Okay.

Student 3: Maybe he's thinking about what he's going to do in the future. Maybe he's going to try to talk more to his boy.

Student 4: Naw, Cuff's never going to change. That's why he's lying there "still as death." He might as well be dead. He just doesn't care about anybody any more. He doesn't even like his wife. She's there way on the other side of the bed.

Student 3: No. You're wrong. He's going to get better. He's going to change.

Teacher: Why do you say that?

Student 3: I don't know. But I just know he's going to change.

Teacher: Have you ever thought about how people change? What do you think is the first step?

Student 3: Well. You've got to know something's wrong.

Teacher: If you don't think anything's wrong, then you can't change. Is that what you're saying?

Student 3: Sure. Cuff knows something's wrong. That's why he says, "I'm damned." And now that he knows what's wrong, he'll be better in the future. I know it.

Student 4: I don't think he ever will. He's too far gone.

Teacher: It's hard to say for sure, isn't it? But can't we say that he's at least aware of a problem.

Now that we've talked some about the poem, what would you say it's about? What's the poet trying to say about people? About life in general? Any reactions?

The teacher in this situation uses language in unobtrusive ways, but the remarks he makes and the questions he asks reflects valid techniques of psychological counselling and a mature grasp of literary analysis. He helps the students gain confidence in their abilities to read and respond to literature, to gain practice in verbalizing their personal responses to pieces of literature, and to explore their individual feelings with relation to what they read and discuss with others. Here are some of the special techniques he uses.

1. Has the poem read out loud so the students will have added help in perceiving it. Provides them with an opportunity to hear rhythm--in this case, monotonous rhythm--and be witnesses to the drama of the piece. Essentially <u>makes specific, immediate, and dramatic</u> the piece of literature.

2. Asks for general reactions or responses--and waits for them. Is secure enough to let the students initiate and help guide the discussion.
3. Accepts with "Uh. Huh." the emotional reaction by Student 1 that "It's a sad poem."
4. When he asks "And you wouldn't like that?" helps Student 1 to clarify his emotional response.
5. When he asks, "Are you saying that not feeling anything is worse than even hating?" rephrases and helps Student 1 to clarify further his original emotional response.
6. When he says, "Okay" shows he accepts Student 1's emotional reactions.
7. With "Any other reactions?" encourages personal, unstructured responses.
8. Does not criticize negative response by Student 2, "It was blah, blah."
9. With "Do you know why you feel that way?" encourages Student 2 to verbalize and thus explore his personal feelings.
10. By careful direction, he continues to help Student 2 come to an understanding of why he doesn't like the poem. Respects Student 2's opinions.
11. With "Do you think the poet used these dull words to show us what Cuff was like?" rephrases for the student.
12. Again accepts opinions of Student 2 with "That's all right, you don't have to like it [the poem]. We're all different.

13. Generalizes for Student 2 and the group with "The words of the poem, in other words, reflect the meaning of the poem."
14. Asks for further, unstructured responses.
15. Encourages Student 3 to consider why the writer ended the poem with words that rhymed rather than with identical words. Lets Student 3 continue an analysis of the meanings of particular words.
16. Suggests that Student 3 explore the reasons why he believes that Cuff's "going to change."
17. With "Have you ever thought of how people change?" helps student clarify his response.
18. Rephrases and helps Student 3 clarify his response with "If you don't think anything's wrong, then you can't change. Is that what you're saying?"
19. With "It's hard to say, isn't it? But can't we say that he's at least aware of a problem?" he accepts varied responses from students and acknowledges the tentative nature of most of their conclusions. Summarizes what can be said about the ending of the poem, using the evidence in the poem.
20. Invites the students--carefully avoiding formal literary terminology--to verbalize and thus to explore their ideas and attitudes about character and theme in the poem.

The overall picture of the second teacher is that of a mature person, well trained both in literary analysis and psychological counseling. How do we learn these principles of psychological counseling? Let me cite a few basic sources which can provide a foundation for the use of language in responding to literature.

Carl R. Rogers was one of the first clinical psychologists to develop successful techniques for helping individuals to become what he calls "fully functioning" persons with a general technique that he calls "client centered therapy." Still basic are his essays "The Characteristics of the Helping Relationship" and "What It Means To Become a Person," both to be found in his book On Becoming a Person.[1] A later book that extends and elaborates his techniques, especially with respect to teaching and learning, is Freedom to Learn.[2] In his popular account of transactional analysis, I'm OK--You're OK, Thomas Harris outlines ways that individuals can interpret their uses of language from the point of view of parent, adult, and child (PAC) and adjust their behavior accordingly.[3] More recently Robert R. Carkhuff has provided a comprehensive program for helping individuals become psychologically independent, involving their physical emotional-interpersonal, and the intellectual characteristics.[4,5,6]

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[1]Carl R. Rogers. On Becoming a Person. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1961.

[2]Carl R. Rogers. Freedom to Learn. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969.

[3]Thomas Harris. I'm OK--You're OK. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967.

[4]Robert R. Carkhuff. The Development of Human Resources. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 197 .

[5]Robert R. Carkhuff. Helping and Human Relations, Vol. I. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969.

[6]Robert R. Carkhuff. Helping and Human Relations, Vol. II. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1969.

Julia Hurley Goelz, in a recent article entitled, "Repetition and Frustration," describes how psychological counseling techniques can be used in the high school English classroom.[7] Robert W. Blake, in a paper, "I See You, I Hear You, You're OK: Humanizing the English Classroom," suggests how the principles of psychological counseling developed by Carl R. Rogers may be adapted in the English classroom.[8]

Many of the techniques developed by psychologists are too technical for our purposes, but there is a series of generally agreed upon approaches which we can use directly with responding to literature. These are the more significant ones for our purposes.

1. Listening. When I listen intently, I convey the impression that "I hear you." I pay attention by nonverbal means, such as by simply nodding my head. And I show I'm listening by verbal means as well, many times by saying, "Yes. Uh. Huh. Okay." This lets the student know that I believe what he says is important and encourages him to continue.

2. Rephrasing. I repeat or paraphrase what I thought I heard the student say. This allows him to check whether or not I understand what he was trying to convey. And it allows him to hear his own thoughts and, so to speak, try them out for size. Many times we don't know how we like our ideas until we hear someone else say them in his own words.

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[7]Julia Hurley Goelz. "Repetition and Frustration," English Journal, Vol. 63 (December, 1974), No. 9:45-49.

[8]Robert W. Blake, "I See You, I Hear You, You're OK: Humanizing the English Classroom," English Journal, Vol. 63 (May, 1974), No. 5: 41-46.

3. Clarifying. I rephrase what the student has said in another way to help him and me understand more clearly his intention. Sometimes I use words different from his to make his meaning more precise. I may start a clarifying use of language by saying "Maybe you're saying . . . ." or "This is what I hear you saying."

4. Perception Checking. It's important to distinguish between facts--which can be verified as right or wrong, independent of one's feelings about them--and perceptions, no matter what they are, which are always correct for the individual who reports them. I might initiate a perception check in this way. "It seems to me this is what I'm hearing you say. When you say the poem is 'blah,' you're getting pretty mad. This is my perception. Maybe you want to talk about why you are reacting so emotionally."

When I allow someone to become aware of my perceptions of how he or she uses language, I let them step out of their own shoes to consider how others interpret what they say. To many young people, it is a revelation that another person could see them in a way different from the way they usually see themselves.

5. Reflecting. This is closely related to perception checking. When I use language in this manner, I express the fact that I am trying to put myself in the student's shoes. Basically I recognize the student's feelings and describe them, not evaluating them or saying they are right or wrong. After reading a poem about snakes, one girl said, "I hate snakes.' Ugh!" I may reflect the student's verbal expression of emotions by saying, "You really get emotionally upset by even the word 'snake,' don't you?" I do not say, "Snakes are clean creatures. You shouldn't let them bother you."

Or I can reflect a student's physical show of feelings. I might say, "You really got upset by that poem, did you know that? You frowned, and your face turned red. Did you realize you felt so strongly about the poem?" Or, "That poem really pleased you, didn't it? You smiled, and your eyes lit up."

When I reflect the student's emotion I say, "You're showing emotions. That's natural for everyone. Don't feel bothered by it." Then I may want to go one step further and ask the student, "You showed anger after reading that poem. Do you want to talk about why you felt that way?"

6. Summarizing. I can summarize where the discussion has been going, where it is at this moment, and where it may go. The summary gives the student a feeling of progress and order. I don't use the summary as an opportunity to tell in an authoritarian fashion what the student's general feelings and ideas should be. Rather I demonstrate to the student how to collect evidence and generalize for himself.

7. Confronting. When I confront a student, I want to help him recognize honestly and directly how he is responding but I do realize that he may feel challenged, exposed, or threatened.

As a result--the teacher and the person trained in counseling techniques--I must be secure enough myself to confront another because a confrontation can result in a show of strong and open emotion. The risk is worth taking, though, for sometimes individuals need to have their attitudes confronted, need to react to a confrontation, and to discover how they felt about their reactions.

Now there is no doubt but that the techniques which I have just described, are effective with individuals having general personal problems,

but the fact remains that the English teacher must be more than a psychological counselor. He must also have at his command a knowledge of the categories of response to literature. And the body of literature dealing with response to literature is as impressive as that relating to psychological counseling.

The basis for most modern studies of response to literature is I. A. Richards' Practical Criticism.[9] In this milestone work, Richards deals with how undergraduate university students responded in writing to a number of poems. Richards identified four kinds of meaning in poetry--four types of responses--that individuals would make to a poem if they were to read poetry well.

1. Sense. The writer speaks to say something. We listen or read to hear something. The sense of a piece is its plain-sense meaning and includes connotation and denotation.

2. Feeling. We have feelings about sense, and we use language to express our feelings, which may, of course, represent pleasant or unpleasant emotions.

3. Tone. The writer has an attitude toward the reader, and he chooses to arrange words in recognition of his awareness of the listener. Sometimes, the writer doesn't even recognize his attitude toward the reader and reveals more of himself than he cares to admit.

4. Intention. And finally the writer has an aim, conscious or unconscious, which he is trying to achieve, an idea or feeling which he is trying to promote.

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[9]I. A. Richards. Practical Criticism. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1939 (First Edition, 1929).

But essential to any recent consideration of response to literature are Purves and Rippere's Elements of Writing about a Literary Work: A Study of Response to Literature and Purves and Beach's Literature and the Reader.[10,11] Here are the general categories of response to literature which Purves has developed.

1. Engagement-involvement. This is the person's acceptance of the work. Although this simple acknowledgement underlies all literary criticism, it is often treated with disdain by teachers and critics. When we become engaged or involved, we tell another how we have experienced the work. This category involves our "willing suspension of disbelief."

2. Perception. This is akin to "understanding" and includes how the person looks at a work. He may analyze it, classify it, or synthesize parts of it. He may deal with the piece all by itself, or he may relate it to events in history.

3. Interpretation. Once he has established the fact that the work exists, he may then try to relate it to what he knows, to make it relevant, in other words. He may try to find personal meaning in it, generalize about it, draw inferences from it, or find parts of it that reflect experiences which he has had.

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[10]Alan C. Purves and Victoria Rippere. Elements of Writing about Literary Work: A Study of Response to Literature. NCTE Research Report No. 9. Champaign, Illinois, 1968.

[11]Alan C. Purves and Richard Beach. Literature and the Reader: Research in Response to Literature, Reading Interests, and the Teaching of Literature. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English, 1972.

4. Evaluation. This category includes all statements that the reader makes about why the work is good or bad. His judgment may be based upon his criteria, or it may involve objective criteria from other sources.

The categories, as defined by Richards, Purves, and others, form a solid basis for responding to literature, but I've found that I must develop my own questions within these categories and train students how to use them. My categories for response to literature and sample questions with them are as follow.

1. Meaning. This is related to Richards' "sense" and includes the "plain sense" meaning of the work.

> What do the individual words actually mean, and what do they mean in relationship to one another?
>
> What is their connotation?
>
> Denotation?

2. Feeling. This is what Purves calls "engagement-involvement." Many times students initially react to a piece of literature with an emotional response, and this, it seems to me, is a natural state of affairs. Once they have established a feeling, they can go on to analyze it. The following questions relate to "feeling."

> How do I feel about this piece?
>
> How can I relate it in terms of my own personal opinions?
>
> Have I perceived experiences or images like these before?

3. Structure. My experience has shown that students find questions in this category the most difficult to respond to. There are all kinds of structures in literature, though, and the strategy is to phrase questions that let students discover the many times simple structure of a piece:

its beginning, middle, end; its arrangement of parts; its repetition of similar elements; its use of foreshadowing or its conclusion. I make it a practice with structure questions not to emphasize traditional literary terms like "initial action," "climax," "denouement" or to make the students identify them in the work and leave it at that. Not that such literary concepts aren't important. They are, but frequently we have substituted an identification of them for more natural uses of language while responding to literature.

Such types of questions as these I include in this category.

> How does he do it?
>
> How is it put together?
>
> What is its form?
>
> What tricks, devices are used? (simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, assonance, dissonance, rhyme, rhythm, special use of figures of speech) More importantly, how do these devices relate to the overall meaning of the piece? Are they obtrusive or are they integral to the meaning?
>
> Possibly, what kind of writing is it? (genre)
>
> What is its background? In what social, cultural, and historical environment was it created?

4. Theme. The danger here is that the student will come to believe that each piece of literature has a clearly stated lesson or moral, like that found at the end of a fable. It's almost as if they believe that after you have read and responded to a piece of literature, you can complete the blank in a statement like this: "The theme is _____."

As with other technical terms, I barely mention the word "theme" at all, and train the students to ask themselves questions like these.

What is the poet saying, or implying, about human beings and other creatures?

What kind of person is the writer?

What does he reveal of himself?

What does he hide, even from himself?

What is his idea about the way the world goes?

5. Value. And finally the students should ask themselves whether a piece is good or bad, effective or ineffective. The longer I teach the more I'm impressed by how different are the reactions of people to the same works of literature--especially to poems--and how important it is for the teacher to accept these different value judgments. The teacher should not attempt to force his tastes upon his students. He can express his own preferences, what he likes or dislikes, but he should never expect the students to concur with his likes and dislikes.

A few sample questions for this category are as follow.

Is this any good? Or is it pretty bad stuff?

Does it work for me? Is it effective?

Does he pull it off? Is it worth pulling off?

Is it important or trivial?

Not all students, of course, will respond to all of these categories with each piece of literature, but they should be aware of the range of potential kinds of responses available to them. If they do so, they may come to realize that the depth and complexity of a piece of literature is reflected by types and varieties of questions that it generates.

One last item, however, remains in any deliberation about the process of using language in responding to literature. Why bother with it?

Is the whole business worth anything? Especially in this era of the computer and rule by numbers, why train the young to respond to literature? We who have been educated in English language and literature frequently take for granted the importance of knowing how to respond to literature. And just as frequently we convey an attitude of superiority towards those mathematicians, businessmen, and engineers who have not been instructed as we have. Few of us realize that many persons in business and the sciences view us as ineffectual pedants. If not for such critics, then for ourselves, we need to justify the considerable time and effort we spend on training the young in how to use language in responding to literature.

For me, these are some of the compelling reasons why it is essential that we should do so.

1. The person who is unable to respond to literature is deprived of the pleasure of using language in its basic forms, in being able to respond to rhythm, song, and figurative language. I. A. Richards stated the essential case in this way.

> There is no gap between our everyday emotional life and the material of poetry. The verbal expression of this life, at its finest, is forced to use the technique of poetry; that is the only essential difference. We cannot avoid the material of poetry. If we do not live in consonance with good poetry, we must live in consonance with bad poetry . . . . On the whole evidence, I do not see how we can avoid the conclusion that a general insensitivity to poetry does witness a low level of imaginative life.[13]

We should be trained in the uses of language in responding to literature, not because it is a luxury for the few, but because we must for our general psychological well-being.

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[13]I. A. Richards. Practical Criticism. pp. 319-320.

2. The person who is able to analyze his own feelings and the feelings of others and can explain how he arrived at them is in better control of them than the person who cannot. For the most part, our feelings and attitudes proceed from thought and intention, not the other way around. You can't, in other words, have a feeling about nothing. You must have an idea first about which to have a feeling. The person who understands this process is more psychologically sound than the individual who doesn't.

3. Since the use of language is primarily a social process, the person who becomes more discriminating and sophisticated in using words becomes better at communicating. But reading literature alone is not enough; it is essential that the person who reads and responds to literature involves others in his responses.

4. The person who is able to respond well to the uses of language in literature is most probably a more healthy, mature individual than the person who cannot. As Richards pointed out, the person who is able to respond to literature well possesses a mind which the psychologists call healthy. He can shift his viewpoint, but still keep his orientation. After having responding to one situation, he can transfer his responses to a new situation. He understands his own emotions and is in control of them. He is able to react to new communications and respond to them in terms of past experiences.

Essentially when we ask a student to develop his uses of language in response to literature we ask him to be responsible for what he says. What better definition of a healthy, mature individual?

5. The person who has training in discriminating among the uses of language protects himself from the harmful effects of language employed

by those who would manipulate others, like scientists, politicians, and media experts. As we become more knowledgeable about our sensitivity to the uses of language, we become more independent.

What can we say finally about the value in learning how to use language in responding to literature? The ability to respond to varieties of literature is a critical one for us all. The process is a difficult and complex one, but we have available effective techniques for probing responses to literature derived from the work of clinical psychiatrists and psychological counselors. At the same time, we have a fairly complete description of the categories to guide us in asking pertinent questions about response to literature. It is difficult to learn to use language well in response to literature, but the end result is worth the effort. As we learn to respond to literature, we discover some of our inherent capabilities as human beings. We find out who we are and who we might become.